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ABSTRACT

This report suggests that in order to enhance implementation of inclusion in rural schools, specific strategies related to instruction, assessment, and collaboration must be adopted. The report overviews cooperative learning strategies that can be used for teaching reading inclusively at the elementary level. The question-answer relationships strategy teaches students to categorize and respond to questions. As students become familiar with the categorization scheme, they take on the role of facilitator, querying and assisting each other in determining the type of question and appropriate responses. In team interviews, the teacher provides a prompt or topic for groups and each member is given an opportunity to be interviewed by other team members. Team interviews can be used in reading as a forum for book reports, character analysis, accessing prior knowledge, writing revision, and book club discussions. Propositions can be used to help students learn to differentiate between fact and opinion, to write a persuasive paragraph or essay, and to debate issues. Reading programs for special needs learners must build on the strengths and interests of students; provide frequent and sensitive feedback; maintain a balance of remedial and compensatory strategies; and insure that service providers and family members provide consistent expectations, cues, and reinforcement to students. Providing teacher support through on-site professional development, technical assistance, and collaborative problem-solving and study groups is critical to successful implementation of inclusive teaching strategies. (LP)

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STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE TEACHING IN RURAL SCHOOLS

While the concept of inclusive teaching may appear to be more in concert with traditional practices of general and special educators in rural community schools than in some others, there are specific strategies for instruction, assessment, and collaboration that significantly enhance successful implementation of inclusive teaching in rural schools. This monograph will explain the rationale for those strategies and provide specific examples for use in teaching reading at the elementary level.

Inclusive Teaching: A Tradition in Rural Schools?

Meeting the diverse needs of all learners in rural classrooms is a challenge many general educators have assumed for years. In the two decades since the Education of all Handicapped Children Act was passed, the creation of a complex special education system probably did not relieve classroom teachers in rural schools of responsibilities for students with special needs to the extent it may have for teachers in larger suburban/urban schools. Why? One reason is chronic shortages of qualified specialty teachers (Berkeley & Ludlow, 1991). Regardless of the availability of funding from state or federal government and configuration of special education through which students with disabilities have been taught, rural schools have continued to report difficulty recruiting and retaining a quality cadre of fully credentialed special education teachers. This problem is accentuated in the case of specialty teachers for students with low incidence conditions, such as autism, sensory impariments, and multiple disabilities.

Further, because there are rarely enough students with intensive or highly specialized needs in a rural community to serve through full-fledged specialty programs, educators have either had to "make do" with a patchwork of adapted services in the community school, or out-of-district placement. Even regional programs for such students are difficult to coordinate and staff in many rural areas, and the current pressure to provide more services for all students in their home community schools may reduce the numbers of students to share costs and services even further.

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However, some rural schools have been farsighted enough to develop flexible, family-centered community-based services for all or almost all students with special learning needs. Often relying on a combination of part-time support services and a high level of involvement by the classroom teachers, these programs take students from where they are and include them in general education activities in whatever ways they are able. Transdisciplinary teaming and a combination of direct and consultative services are cornerstones of these programs (York, Rainforth & Giangreco, 1990). For these schools the new challenge in inclusive teaching is helping all students meet new learning standards.

Principles of Inclusive Teaching

Given this history, what strategies do teachers in rural schools need to implement inclusive teaching successfully at the current time? How is inclusive schooling different from the one room school of lore in which students of all ages and abilities learned together under the tutelage of one teacher? First, inclusive schooling is a collaborative venture. Whether through remote access technologies, home visits, coteaching with specialists, or transdisciplinary team meetings, inclusive schooling is not a solo activity.

Second, inclusive schooling is for all students - even for those most at risk. The time has past when "a good days work for a good day's pay" doing manual labor is a viable alternative to schooling in rural communities. The dropout rate for students in rural communities remains more than twice the national average, and students who fail are more than twice as likely to drop out of school. This pattern must be interrupted by changing instruction and assessment to better meet the needs of learners who are not experiencing success or personal satisfaction from their schooling. Moreover, twice as many rural students with disabilities live in poverty - which is associated with many other risk factors such as educational attainment of parents, especially mothers, and teen pregnancy (Grossman, 1995). Breaking the pattern of illiteracy, poverty, and less success in school should be a major focus of inclusive teaching in rural schools.

The third way in which inclusive schooling today is different is the expectation that all students will meet national standards (Jervis & McDonald, 1996). The current national education goals are clear. All students will be ready to enter public school by age six and attain specified goals in literacy, mathematics, and science. The standards that are being set by states to attain these goals, as well as the assessments of the standards, will increasingly influence the content and type of instruction for all students.

How do rural schools support inclusive teaching? Most importantly, schools model "learning communities" in which educators, students, and parents value and support each other's learning and growth in constructive ways (Barth, 1990). Schools also support teachers in designing curricula, programs, and classrooms which are shaped to match the needs of students, rather than trying to reshape

students to match programs (Gage & Falvey, 1995). In inclusive schools, educators:

- accept ownership and assume responsibility for *all* students in their community (Stainback, Stainback, & Ayres, 1996)

- approach teaching and learning as inquiry-driven, reflective, problem-solving processes (Schafer, 1967; Darling-Hammond, 1993)

- articulate goals and purposes, assess learner responses, and adjust teaching practices to maximize benefits for individual learners (Reschley, 1996)

- maintain the school as a living, adapting example of an organization which values diversity and collaboration (Pugach & Johnson, 1995).

Inclusive teaching requires more than a shift in philosophy and increase in collaboration, it requires a fundamental rethinking by general *and* special educators of what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed for *all* students. To successfully implement changes in the general education curriculum so it will more adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities, teachers need support. However, teachers often have not been adequately prepared to employ these strategies in ways that meet the individual needs of students with disabilities (Schumm, Vaughn, Gordon & Rothlein, 1994). Leadership at the building level and beyond, ongoing technical assistance, and professional development activities on site, are all important sources of support for rural teachers implementing inclusive teaching strategies (Sebastian & McDonnell, 1995).

Implementing Inclusive Teaching

For the past several years the authors have been working with teachers in rural New Hampshire and North Carolina to develop more effective inclusive teaching strategies. At one elementary school in New Hampshire in the first year, classroom and special educators established a philosophy, definition, and goals for inclusive teaching within their school. During the second and third years, changes in roles, responsibilities, scheduling, and other aspects of service delivery were implemented and monitored. In the spring of the fourth year (1996) a professional development group was selected to study specific teaching strategies for collaborative teaching. The group consisted of four classroom teachers (Gr. T-1, Gr. 3, Gr. 4, Gr. 6), the two full-time special educators, the language therapist, the school counselor, and the first author as facilitator and met for five afternoon sessions. Technical assistance was provided through consultation throughout all phases.

In North Carolina at one elementary school fourth grade teachers have been working for the past five years on an adaptive science and social studies curriculum using a variety of hands-on teaching activities and cooperative learning. Students are all members of cooperative teams. The faculty meet regularly for planning and evaluation of their teaching strategies. College students also support the general educators and special educators who coteach these classes.

The recommendations for implementing inclusive teaching strategies that follow are based on professional literature and experiences with these educators. While the teachers in both settings applied the strategies across the curriculum, an area of common concern at all grade levels was reading development. Reading is a complex process that many students with disabilities have difficulty mastering. Most traditional approaches to teaching reading to students with disabilities require extensive amounts of individualized instruction delivered on a one to one or small group basis outside the classroom. Often there were significant differences between the approaches used within the general education and special education settings. Thus, the teachers and special educators in our rural schools were particularly interested in strategies for inclusive teaching that would address students' needs in reading.

Teaching Reading Inclusively

How can educators ensure that the instructional needs of students with disabilities are met in inclusive reading programs? Controversy continues about which methods of teaching reading are most effective (Smith, 1992). Likely, there is no single "best" method for all students. Certainly traditional basal reading programs were not effective for all students, and while whole language has enriched classroom environments and enhanced appreciation for individual patterns of literacy, evidence suggests it is not effective for all students either, particularly some students with disabilities (Mather, 1992).

However, regardless of the curriculum or approach used there are certain elements that are essential to every reading program, including: reading as a communicative process; use of functional, meaningful reading materials; adequate redundancy and practice; a balance of direct and indirect instruction, and regular opportunities for sustained reading (Schmidt & Harriman, in press). These components are important and can be addressed through activities for all students. However, as the teacher determines how to integrate them into classroom activitites throughout each week, s/he also must consider the intensity of instruction that may be required and appropriate ways to monitor the progress of individual students.

What types of strategies help teachers integrate these elements effectively for students with special needs within general education classrooms? One survey of more than 50 teachers in three states indicated that cooperative learning and peer coaching are two types of strategies upon which teachers rely heavily (Harriman & Renew, 1994). Therefore specific learning strategies that can be taught to a whole class or instructional group and then implemented through a cooperative learning or partner learning setting appears to be one area of need. These types of strategies are compatible with inclusive teaching situations in which classroom teachers "sometimes but not always" have the assistance of other adults (paraprofessionals, special educators, volunteers, or related service providers), as is often the case in rural schools. Three of many strategies that can be implemented in this way are: question-answer relationships, team interviews, and propositions.

Question-Answer Relationships (QAR). QAR is a reading comprehension strategy for categorizing and responding to questions (Raphael, 1986). Through direct instruction with the teacher, students first learn to categorize questions as *textually explicit* (words in text are similar to words in question; answer may be all in one sentence), *textually implicit* (words in text may be different than words in question; information needed to answer may be spread throughout the text), and *scriptally implicit* (answer is not in text; information to answer has to come from reader's background knowledge). Then they practice formulating answers to the different categories of questions. A simple rubric with student-friendly categorical labels (ex. *in the book* or *in my head)* complemented by picture cues facilitates mastery of the categorization system by students with language or memory difficulties (Bos & Vaughn, 1994). As students become familiar with the categorization scheme they can take on the role of facilitator, querying and assisting each other in determining the type of question and an appropriate response.

Practice applying the strategy with a partner or small group can be an effective form of *indirect instruction* that motivates the student to use the strategy independently eventually. The verbal rehearsal of responses that takes place through this strategy is very useful to students later in completing assignments across the content areas, and provides *functional* modeling of sentence patterns and word usage. However, students with language or writing difficulties may need more support and guidance than their peers in applying it in other settings - especially initially. Consistent use of the same cue system and adequate amounts of guided practice can be facilitated by special education support staff or other trained classroom volunteers. This strategy is a good foundation for reading and responding to questions on performance-based assessments as well as traditional measures.

Team Interviews. Team interviews are just one of a set of interview formats that can be used in cooperative learning (Stone, 1995). An advantage of the team interview is the inherent balance in "voice-letting" and "voice-getting". For high risk students the team interview can provide a relatively safe, small group environment in which to practice expressing an opinion, responding to questions, and explaining a point. In team interview, the teacher provides a prompt or topic and a time frame for each interview (ex. 2-5 minutes). Within each cooperative group, each member has a turn being interviewed by the other team members. Depending on the prompt, the interviewee is often asked to make a few specific opening statements, then the group follows up with questions and discussion. To balance participation, roundrobin questioning is recommended.

Team interviews can provide an opportunity to rehearse the types of questions learned through QAR as well as selected social/communication skills included in the IEP's of students with disabilities. Students with moderate to severe disabilities may benefit more if an adult facilitator is available to monitor and provide feedback. They may also provide an alternative way for students to demonstrate achievement of some learning standards in literacy. Team interviews can be used in reading as a

forum for book reports, character analysis, accessing prior knowledge (prereading/writing), writing revision, and book club discussions.

Reacting to Propositions. Propositions can be used to help students learn to differentiate between fact and opinion, to write a persuasive paragraph or essay, and to debate issues Johnson & Lo is (1990). All of these skills involve language processes, some level of inferential comprehension/abstract reasoning, and social awareness, areas that may pose difficulty for students with disabilities. In propositions, the teacher poses statements relevant to issues or concepts under study. (ex. The hero was wrong to break the law to save the victim...) Students must agree or disagree and support their position. Through a series of individual, and group research and response activities, students are taught strategies for recognizing different perspectives as well as defending a position. Learning to "argue both sides" of an issue and that the amount of support for a position is more important than personal loyalty or popularity in winning a debate pose authentic, highly motivational learning situations. Community members can be valuable resources for facilitating activities around topics in their area of expertise. Also, support staff such as school counselors can provide valuable support or follow-up with students regarding the personal interactions that take place during classroom activities. In small schools, whole school referenda and voting on issues provides functional preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Collaborative Assessment and Inclusive Teaching

Frequent communication and coordination are crucial regardless of the strategies selected. For the greatest success, reading programs for learners with special needs :

- *build on strengths and interests* to maintain adequate effort,
- provide *frequent and sensitive feedback on progress* so the program can be finetuned monthly if adequate progress is not observed,
- include a balance of *remedial and compensatory strategies* so the student becomes increasingly skilled and independent,
- insure service providers and family members provide *consistent* or complementary *expectations, cues, and reinforcement.*

The importance of ongoing assessment cannot be understated, and must be perceived as a shared responsibility between general and special educators. If a teaching approach does not yield the desired results despite a sustained quality level of implementation of a strategy over time, then educators must be flexible enough to admit it is not working, and try another approach. "Blame" seldom contributes to solving these dilemmas, but attention to and support for making adjustments in the implementation of strategies is constructive and necessary. Learning together through inclusive teaching how to use strategies such as those recommended in this paper effectively can be a challenging yet renewing experience for general and

special educators in rural schools. One way perceive it is as an opportunity to follow Allington's advice (1994, p. 18) and focus on "supporting versus sorting" students.

Conclusions

Public schools reflect the current values of their communities. However, they also have the responsibility to prepare students for the world of the future. Honoring both requires a shared purpose that is consistent with the mores of the community, yet accommodating of innovative teaching approaches, resources, and technologies. Particularly in rural schools, educators must convince an often tightly knit community that changes in practice are in the interest of students as well as the broader school community. With regard to inclusive schooling, values such as self-reliance and community interdependence are often familiar concepts that can be used as a basis for understanding contemporary thinking and practices (Berkeley & Bull, 1995). However, other underlying attitudes and assumptions counter to the notion of high expectations and full participation of all students may need to be faced and challenged in order to enable teachers to implement inclusive practices effectively.

Providing support for teachers through onsite professional development, technical assistance and consultation, and collaborative problem-solving and study groups are critical to the effective implementation of inclusive teaching strategies in reading and throughout the curriculum. Distance learning options may enhance accessibilty to such supports for many rural schools.

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